



High Stakes and Misdemeanors

So now you are a technical program manager. You climbed from trainee, senior engineer, team lead, project manager to program manager. You planned your career and made the sacrifices.

When staff set up the office pool, you went back to night school. While colleagues went to the local bar, you were in class with the statistics tsar.

While teammates looked for the easy chore, you volunteered for the quality program de jour. When colleagues were on the slopes, you kept the project off the ropes.

While your rival hatched political schemes, you were leading tiger teams. While the boss was on the links, you discovered how the customer thinks.

You endured staff meetings, suffered cubical seating, and dodged performance review beatings.

As you don your coveted title of the Geek Godfather, you will realize the job is poles apart from your aspiration. Even the best-prepared engineer can be blindsided by the realities and limitations of the job. The stakes are high and rife with risk. Here are a few misdemeanors to avoid.

First, you have little time to run the program. Even though you are the Big Kahuna, the daily work is now out of your hands. Your time and influence will shift from direct to indirect: articulating and conveying strategy, institutionalizing rigorous processes, and setting value and tone for projects – not the typical skills of an engineer.

Ironically, the transition from engineer to program manager leaves a sense of lost control. Initially, you feel more like Seinfeld's Kramer – restless, disjointed, and sketchy – than like his alter ego Peter Von Nostrand: cool, calm, and collected. New program managers tend to gravitate back to the comfort and familiarity of daily operations at the expense of mounting strategic, financial, legal, personnel, and stakeholder demands.

It is critical that you learn to relinquish responsibility and manage through delegation and accountability. Like the bridle, the keel, and the fulcrum – it's about leverage. Without leverage, you will lose control.

Second, you are always sending signals. The high profile of a program manager is viewed as a perk of the job. Au contraire. The extent of scrutiny and interpretation of your every move can be vitiating. The stealthy days in the lab, computer room, or office are gone. Your microphone is

always on and the cameras constantly rolling.

Also gone are speculative discussions with managers, employees, and the public. One day you explore the intrigue of open source software and the next day you wake up with a new Linux server farm. One day you complement the use of rate monotonic analysis and the next day you are listening to a briefing on vacation scheduling via rate monotonic analysis.

Consider carefully your actions, conversations, and messages. Strive for simplicity, clarity, consistency and master analogies, metaphors, and allegories to communicate your message.

Third, beware of shooting stars. Like the grass on the other side, it is tempting to reach for another's guru. Do not be blinded by that light. Shining stars in one environment fade in others. Ask the Yankees about Alex Rodriguez's playoff performance. Moreover, stars do not stay with organizations long. Supernovas that jump, like free radicals, to your program are susceptible to other enticements. Ask the Cleveland Cavaliers where Carlos Boozer is playing this year.

Bringing in a superstar resembles an organ transplant. The new body rejects the prized organ. This battle consumes resources that take away from the healthy parts of the body that soon cause other health problems. Transplanting a star into your organization will no doubt cause resentment, conflict, and impede team morale.

My advice: grow your stars from within. Internal stars know the culture, garner employee support, and are more loyal. If you do star search, assure the luminary can shine in your program.

Finally, issuing commands can be costly. The consequences of orders expand proportionally to the breadth of command. Unilateral commands that overrule thoughtful decisions trigger resentment, insecurity, and perplexity. Excessive intervention, inquisition, and supersession create bottlenecks as employees are excessively inclined to consult you before acting.

As program manager, you will have to make decisions and give orders. When doing so, be selective, deliberate, and inclusive with a broader plan of action in mind. If not, your office will resemble the lines at Seinfeld's famous Soup Kitchen – no funding for you! Next!

—Gary Petersen
Shim Enterprise, Inc.

No Soup for You!

